



**SHARING THE NARRATIVE OF SHIRLEY SHERROD:  
LESSONS IN RACE AND RACISM**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**I**t is no accident or unintended error that the false accusation of racial bigotry against Shirley Sherrod, former Director of the USDA in Georgia, and the manufactured racial controversy around it, have all but disappeared in the media with no penalty for the perpetrator or his friends at Fox, and no follow-up investigation and exposure of the racialized wilderness into which these self-appointed saviors of White privilege and power are leading the country. But before the issue recedes too far in the short-term memory of those cultivated to endure only quick and uncomplicated messages sent and received, it is important to extract some of its valuable lessons.

The first lesson is this: American society is not really ready to deal with *race as reality*, only as spectacle and special topic, quickly covered on the daily and nightly news – and even then only as a superficial and episodic concern about racial attitudes, speech and the routine talk about tolerance. To deal seriously with race and the raw reality it is, is to deal with *racism*, a system of denial, deformation, and destruction of a people's history, humanity and human rights based exclusively or primarily on the false concept of race. And here race is not peoplehood or ethnicity, but a socio-biological category constructed by Europe to assign human worth and social status using White people as the exemplary model.

It is to deal with racism as imposition – daily violence and domination; as ideology – a system of ideas negative to the dominated to justify domination and dominance; and as institutional arrangements – structures and processes that promote and preserve White racial domination and dominance. In a word, it is to deal with White dominance in wealth, power and status and the detrimental and

deadly impact this has on the lives of Black people and other peoples of color.

Secondly, another lesson to be learned is how vulnerable Black people remain even in supposedly liberal circumstances and even with a Black President – indeed, even within his administration. Shirley Sherrod had been loyal, loving and deeply committed to a post-racist, just and good society. She had been doing an excellent job for Black, White and other farmers. She lectured in 1986 at the NAACP gathering, explaining the need for racial reconciliation. She had used her personal narrative of helping, in spite of initial reservation, a White farmer infected with an acute case of social ignorance, personal arrogance and racial resentment directed toward her whom he had come to for help.

It was a classic Black Christian story of refusing to reciprocate hate, and a civil rights activist's call to unite the have-nots across racial lines for progressive social change. But a rightwing blogger had taken her narrative and made it appear as if she were saying the opposite and fearing a White negative response to this '86 narrative on racial healing mistranslated as denying Whites help would hurt President Obama, his officials forced Mrs. Sherrod to resign. They did not investigate or even show her the common courtesy of a call into the office to be questioned and heard. Instead, she was called in her car, asked to pull over and text in her resignation. They have since apologized and asked her to return.

Thirdly, the lesson is that President Obama and his administration cannot justify or sustain, in good faith, the tendency and willingness to sacrifice right, reputations, careers and innocent persons on the altar of rightwing allegations, attacks and disruptive agendas. They seem not to have learned from

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the sacrificing of Rev. Wright, Van Jones, and ACORN that evil unresisted reinvigorates itself and continues until challenged and checked.

Clearly, Obama must change the way he and his advisors soft-shoe, tiptoe and bend in the wind of rightwing hot air madness. Indeed, he must not constantly retreat, sacrifice persons and principles to appease people who hate and harass him as a way of life and will never be satisfied with anything except his failure, his political absence and a new address. Even then, they will try to discredit him and deny his achievements. Catering to them can only encourage them, foster contempt from them and others, and make insecure anyone with an activist history or intention of working with the poor, preyed-upon and less powerful to achieve social justice.

Another lesson to be learned here is that this is not just about Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Van Jones or Shirley Sherrod, but about the rightwing agenda to regain dominance in national politics, to disrupt, delay and destroy any hope or move forward on a progressive agenda. And this means disrupting the Obama presidency and using race-baiting against Obama and Black people. It means attempting to whip the White majority into a racial frenzy, to make them feel victimized, not by corporate greed or prior Republican administrations' policies, but by the scary ascendance of a Black president, and any signs of Black people seeking social justice

and demanding an end to White-skin privilege and monopoly on wealth, power and status.

In this regard, it is more than a coincidence that in the midst of Obama's push for rightful restitution for Black farmers, Mrs. Sherrod, one of their most effective advocates, is targeted and forced to resign. This not only affects the status of the designated bill to do this, the Pigsford II initiative, but again raises questions about the justice of this effort. As a matter of history, this initiative grows out of a class action suit won by Black farmers for decades of discrimination in the South by the USDA officials. Even the USDA conceded discrimination through denying and delaying loans and restrictive monitoring. Now the rightwing and Republicans are trying to block payments, disqualify claims and thus deny long overdue justice to these Black farmers.

Finally, the lesson here is also that there is a ruthless ideological war being waged by the rightwing to delegitimize our rightful social justice claims, to appropriate our identity as a moral and social vanguard and to reverse the moral order, manufacturing White wounds and worries, and inventing White victims while denying Black ones. Indeed, they seek to hide the fact that it is not race or racial difference that divides and discredits this country, but racism; not the way people look, but the unequal way they are forced to live based on the way they look and the way they are unjustly judged. Clearly, we cannot let this stand and our response must be our continuing and self-conscious, righteous and relentless struggle.

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